

Implications from the Second Coming of Christ

**Eighteenth Sunday After Trinity
(From the Epistle: *1 Corinthians i. 4.*)**

King James Version (KJV): *1:4 I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; 5 That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; 6 Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: 7 So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: 8 Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

New International Version (NIV): *4 I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I have observed that the subject of the implications of Christ's Second Coming is peculiarly absent in modern preaching. If present at all, it is often with that sort of fascinated speculation that speaks more of the kind of idle curiosity and titillation associated with fantasy fiction. It has little of the very practical, rubber-meets-the-road urgency that accompanies the New Testament references to the topic. Instead, it is the stuff of "Rapture" novels, of blood-pressure elevating efforts to identify modern personalities with figures in the prophetic passages; a certain gleeful, hand-rubbing love of mayhem and misery that makes the Bible into "reality TV", instead of the Christian's Manual of Survival that it really is.

I have asked myself on a thousand occasions why this is so. And the answers I've arrived at have proven profoundly disturbing to me, especially in light of what the Scripture says about the actual state of things prior to the return of Christ. Repeatedly, we are warned by both Christ and the Apostles that the very times of the end are those of widespread deception, of uncertainty, of apathy and indifference even among the faithful, of apostasy, of lawlessness and rebellion against God:

-2 Timothy 3:1-5a: 1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. 2 People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God-- 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power.

-Matthew:24:4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you... 12 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, 13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved."

-Matt. 25:1 "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom...5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep....13 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

-Luke 21:34-36 *"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. 35 For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."*

In other words, in the very hour when the Church should be on the edge of her seat, as it were, watching and waiting, seeking for scriptural evidences of Christ's return, preparing herself in every way; attentive, earnestly listening, just like someone long expecting the knock of a loved one at the door, she faces not only widespread deception, and tremendous adversity, but also the danger of her own indifference and coldness. Conditions for readiness could hardly be less ideal.

Have we no right to expect much of the Church? She is, after all, the product of the two millennia of her own history. Have not time and experience, trial and error, taught her anything at all? If since her birth at that first Pentecost she has been through childhood and adolescence --long, hard, painful, fraught with advances as well as defeats-- can we not hope that she has begun to finally arrive at that place St. Paul wrote of elsewhere:

...that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
(Ephesians 4:12b-13).

The doctrine of the Second Coming --far from being a playground for speculation where opinion and imagination run wild, the stuff of spiritual immaturity-- is precisely that *solid food, not milk* (1 Corinthians 3:2), that we should be fit and able to eat. What would be the result?

First, security. Our spiritual house is built upon a foundation that neither floods, nor fire, nor governments, nor war can alter:

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:3).

We simply do not have to have lasting confidence in efforts toward world peace, or in vain hopes that man has the ability to significantly right his wrongs. And so we do not subject ourselves to the same frustration and despair that invariably meet the idealism men adhere to when they refuse to have faith. Christ will return to establish His own kingdom, not to meet with men in the one they've already set up, and to be subject to their terms.

Second, spiritual maturity. At the very threshold of adulthood, young people gain a certain sobriety and sense of responsibility as they face the prospect of living on their own and bearing all of the burdens of growing up. If everything is as it should be, they look ahead with both fear and delight, fear of the very immensity of the new state of life they face, and delight that at last --at long last!-- they will be able to try their wings, gather to themselves all of the raw materials of childhood that have been a part of their training, and soar free, rising high to meet both

their own self-expectations and those of friends and family who surround them. For Christ to return means for the Church that her earth-bound period of development has ended. Her days of apprenticeship in the things of God will be over. There will be a certain finality to these very familiar words regarding the mission of the Church in the world (quoting the “General Confession”, *Book of Common Prayer* [BCP] p. 6): “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done...”

The earnestness of the hour should impel us to seek to make amends in this sphere before it is no longer possible to do so. The consequence is the casting aside of all that doesn't matter --that which is of much significance to men but of little to God-- in favor of isolating those things that *do*. Does the former include, for example, impressing our communities with our apparent wealth and success? Encouraging Americans to add Jesus to their lives so that they can enjoy “all this, and heaven too” by presenting the Gospel in terms that are untrue to it, consigning the demands of the Christian life to microscopic fine print? Being so slavishly devoted to relevance that we beg the world to teach us its language so we and Jesus will be accepted by it?

And what of the things that *do* matter? Again, quoting the BCP, from its prayer “for the whole state of Christ's Church” (p. 74):

“...[we beseech] thee to inspire continually the Universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity and concord: And grant that all those who do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love”.

As we contemplate with that holy mixture of dread and expectation the return of our Lord, what will we do with our division, as the hour draws near? Dare we pass into His presence assigning this concern to one of secondary importance? Should we concede that “what is” is the best there is? Does the mandate to preach the Gospel take precedence over the fulfillment of Jesus' high priestly prayer (John 17)?:

22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

A Church preparing to meet Christ should be doing her best to ready herself:

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. (Revelation 19:7)

Made herself ready...! If this includes repentance from our divided state, and the pride and stubbornness that have prevented reunification, then there yet remains a great work to be begun at once.

Facing up to things is a principal evidence of maturity.

In addition to security and spiritual maturity, the doctrine of the Second Coming will bring **spiritual authority and power**. A church that is not convinced of the significance of the Lord's return --when He will *destroy all dominion, authority, and power* (1 Corinthians 15:24b)-- and awaiting that return filled with faith and hope, will preach a message shorn of

power and effect. Unbelieving mankind plays a desperate game of self-perpetuation. It is alive in everything. In his amusements and through the arts he erects a million distractions to the inevitable. Through science and philosophy he creates a magisterium that justifies his existence, predicts his destiny, confirms his present glory through the evolutionary processes of long ages past that have led grandly to...*him*, and provides him with ready explanations when his fear and panic of the unknown become unmanageable.

The Second Coming, however, with the fruits of humility, certainty, and security it affords the Christian, gives him the unique perspective of clearly viewing lost humanity's true end. And, in earnest love for man's soul, he looks past the world's fear, pride, and rejection of God to present the only hope there is.

For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth; and with righteousness to judge the world, and the peoples with his truth (Psalm 96:13) reads the last line of the "Venite, exultemus Domino" (BCP p.9) so familiar to every Anglican Christian as a portion of the Morning Prayer service.

The very last two verses of the Bible:

He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.